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COMPETENT, CONNECTED AND CONFIDENT: FEMALE CAREER SUCCESS IN CALL CENTRES?

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Abstract

This paper reports on the employment experience of women in New Zealand call centres. It seeks to determine whether women can develop satisfactory career progress and links the findings to the employment relations context in New Zealand. The study, initiated in 2003, reports on six case studies. Contrary to the prevailing negative portrayal of call centre employment and career paths, our findings demonstrate women are achieving career success in call centres. Management practices can accommodate the different labour market needs of women, and many respondents reported feeling passionate about their jobs. Those working at entry level said they enjoyed meeting people and being part of a workplace, which enhanced their career prospects. Most respondents mentioned the development of skills and confidence. Rather than deskilling, call centre processes have enabled many respondents to become competent, connected and confident.

Introduction

Call centres have been part of the changing landscape of work since the 1990s and the growth in their numbers has been exponential. Their rapid growth has taken statisticians by surprise (Paul & Huws, 2002, p. 6). Questions have been raised as to whether these new types of workplaces provide decent work and much of the research on call centre employment in the UK and Australia suggests they do not.

The international research has focussed on employment processes used to control workers. Concerns expressed have included the use of monitoring and measurement of worker performance as call centre representatives (CSRs) take telephone calls and employers try to ensure they provide a standardized service to callers. Statistics collected on each call record how workers process the call against benchmarks and other key performance indicators. In this way management can monitor and micromanage operators as required. Such practices contribute to the stress of call centre work and reports of high turnover and retention issues. Limited career paths have also been widely reported in call centre workplaces (See for example Bristow, Munday, & Gripaios, 2000; Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Demaret, Quinn, & Grumiau, 1999; Income Data Services, 2005; Merriden, 2003; Middleton, 2001; Taylor & Bain, 2001; URCOT, 2000;).

In the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand seventy per cent of the call centre workforce is female but there have been only a small number of studies examining the position of women in these workplaces. Most of this research suggests that the traditional barriers still exist

and females are not achieving equitable career path development in call centres for a variety of reasons (Belt, Richardson, & Webster, 2002; Belt, Richardson, Webster, Tjildens, & Klaveren, 2000; Belt, 2002; Buchanan, R., & Koch-Schulte, S. 2000; Durbin, 2006;).

The barriers identified have included: not being prepared for promotion to management; the challenge of combining managerial careers with family life; not wanting to relocate to another geographical location and gendered stereotypes keeping women out of the decision making management roles (Belt, 2002; Belt, Richardson, & Webster, 2000; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000). The research in Canada by Buchanan and Koche-Shulte (2000) found women perceived their call centre work as embarrassing and something that they were 'reduced' to doing with 'limited job security and opportunities for advancement (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000).

New Zealand research: mixed evidence

A small amount of research has been undertaken on New Zealand call centre employment with mixed results. These include evidence of precarious work (Hannif & Lamm, 2004) and issues around the connectiveness between life and working on the frontline at a public service call centre (Copas, 2004). Positive attitudes to the adoption of technology were found in bank call centres (Sayers, Barney, Page, & Naidoo, 2003) while other research commented on the policy implications of attracting call centre investment to New Zealand (Larner 2004).

An earlier paper on the current research reported mixed findings regarding turnover and retention strategies in call centres in a tight labour market (Hunt & Rasmussen, 2007). The mixed evidence and more positive employment findings reported on New Zealand call centres may be due to call centre size, the tight labour market and management approaches adjusting to retain staff.

Comparative research: shortcomings

Some of the research on call centre employment has included cross-national comparisons, which are useful for highlighting universal call centre practices (See for example, Deery & Kinnie, 2002; Holman, Batt, & Holtgrew, 2007; Kinnie & Parson, 2004). However, none of these studies links the reported employment outcomes to the local labour market and employment situation. A recent global report on call centres has noted that, despite the convergence of practices, call centres have a remarkably 'national face' (Holman et al., 2007).

There have been no studies investigating the position of women in these contemporary workplaces linked to their employment relations contexts. This paper attempts to address this gap and reports on the employment history of female career actors who *have* experienced promotion in New Zealand call centres. It links the findings to the employment relations context that has prevailed in New Zealand during the research period (2003 to 2006). The empirical data draws on the career literatures to analyse findings to provide insights on the patterns and motivations to work of females working in call centres.

One of the problems of researching employment in call centres is their wide use in diverse industry sectors. Finding statistical data on call centre employment creates a challenge for researchers as call centres are used across sectors, including banking and financial services; public and emergency services; market research; telecommunications; manufacturing; hospitality and tourism; utilities and not-for-profit organisations. This paper suggests that the diversity of call centres accounts for the convergent/divergent nature of the employment research to date. But, as noted earlier, most of the research does not take into account the macro environment in which each study is located. Often the findings are survey responses to questionnaires that have been widely distributed across call centre types and countries.

The use of case study ethnographic research has highlighted mixed evidence from different call centre types in one location and has included the voice of women managers (see Houlihan, 2002). This paper seeks to add to such work by interviewing women who have been promoted in six New Zealand case studies. The findings highlight the need to be careful about generalising about call centre employment. Despite universally adopted practices in call centre, research on call centre work needs to take account the many different *contexts*. These can include the sector, call centre type,

social cultural norms, available labour pool and legislative employment framework.

Limitations of career theory

The contemporary career literatures suggest that women have very different motivations regarding careers and work. They often make different work-life choices to men. This was already found by Dex (1987) with only 5% of women giving "following their career" as their main reason for working. Research suggests that this was due to the limited view of their prospects, childcare constraints and broken work patterns.

The study of women's careers requires the research to take into account the context of their lives and the complex differences in their timing, emphasis and discontinuities. As women still bear a large part of the responsibility of parenthood they can be motivated to choose roles that allow them to balance multiple and conflicting role demands (Powell & Mainiero, 1992). The choices women make can depend on a number of factors or constraints including their early socialisation. The career and developmental literatures indicate that, at different times, women place either emphasis on career and personal achievements at work or on family and personal responsibilities. However, much of the career research has definitional problems as to what 'career' means. The theory does not distinguish between 'work' or 'career' and the motivation to each over the work life history of female workers. There is some research which attempts to categorise women's motivation and attitude. For example, Hakim (2002) suggests that 60% of women who say they want to work, are not really career committed. However, such categorisation is simplistic and problematic as it assumes that respondents make choices in an ideal world.

It is recognised that women have a different perspective to 'careers/work', compared to men. Their approach to work and life often means they seek to find a balance between their work and personal/family relationships. This can affect their career decisions and preferences. Some jobs simply do not facilitate women achieving such a balance which means women will trade-off between the needs of their family and their own work motivation (Gallos, 1989).

As globalisation leads to a greater number of ethnically mixed workforces, valuing diversity in career paths may mirror a shift to the language of equal opportunities from the concern with equality. Careers will become increasingly mixed and workers will move across countries much more readily to develop new skills as part of their human capital (Edwards & Wajcman, 2005). The largest employment sectors are the services and there is evidence that women have considerable advantages in this sector because of their communication and social skills. Women are also considered more participative, team oriented and supportive of their colleagues. Call centres may be ideal workplaces to foster and encourage this type of organisational behaviour and the workplaces are attractive to new immigrant workers as they cross

countries. This current research sought to ascertain whether such workplaces foster and develop the skills and abilities that women bring to the labour market when taking jobs in call centres as part of their work-life transitions...

The New Zealand call centre context

The New Zealand context for this research has been dominated by a labour market demanding flexibility and improved skills. The development of the call centre sector from 1990 onwards has coincided with a changing legislative and employment relations context.

- i. The Employment Contracts Act (1991) encouraged more casual and part-time work conditions. Total employment of women working increased 22% between 1991 and 1996 with a 41% increase in the number of women part time.
- ii. New legislation the Employment Relations Act (2000) was established to develop a more co-operative approach to employment relationships.
- iii. During the research period (2003 to 2006) New Zealand experienced a very tight labour market, with one of the lowest levels of unemployment in the OECD (around 3%).

Historically, women have made good progress in New Zealand society. Recently in the Global Gender Index 2006, New Zealand was ranked 1 in terms of education and political empowerment. However, despite this and the egalitarian nature of New Zealand society, women still tend to be concentrated in just five occupations - often in sectors of low pay. A persistent gender pay gap and with 20% of women working part time highlight that women often have *limited career opportunities*. As call centres will continue to feature in the employment landscape of the future, it is important to determine whether such workplaces constitute a positive development for women and their career needs.

Methodology

Given the nature of the call centre industry and the topic, qualitative research approach was chosen in which a range of call centre case studies were selected. Data was collected by using mixed methods: thirty two in-depth interviews with women who had been promoted; in-depth interviews with six representatives of senior management at each case study; a focus group discussion with CSRs; sixty self-completed questionnaires completed by CSRs; and non-participant ethnographic observation of call centre practices at three of the case studies.

To ensure that the research reflected the diversity of call centre work, the six chosen case studies included call centres typical of the industry structure in New Zealand. The case studies were: a privately owned New Zealand outsourcer (Outsource Co); a Government public service call centre (GovtOrg); a Singaporean based Multi-National Enterprise, a food manufacturer (FoodCo); a UK

based Multi-National Enterprise market research company (MarketResearchCo); a New Zealand co-operative of primary produce exporters (ExportCo), and a publicly listed Australian owned bank, (BankCo). These are profiled in Figure 3 and Table 3 below. Ethnographic research as a non-participant observer was undertaken at two of the call centres.

As can be noted in figures 1 and 2 below the demographic in the call centre is mainly New Zealand European. However at entry level it was noticeable that the respondents came from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

Table 1: Position of Women Respondents Interviewed

Position within Organisation	N
CC Manager, Operations Manager	15
National Development Manager	1
Team Leader	11
HR Manager	1
Sales and Marketing Manager	1
Project Manager	2
Technical Manager	1
Total No. of Women Interviewed	32

Figure 1: Ethnicity of Promoted Female Respondents

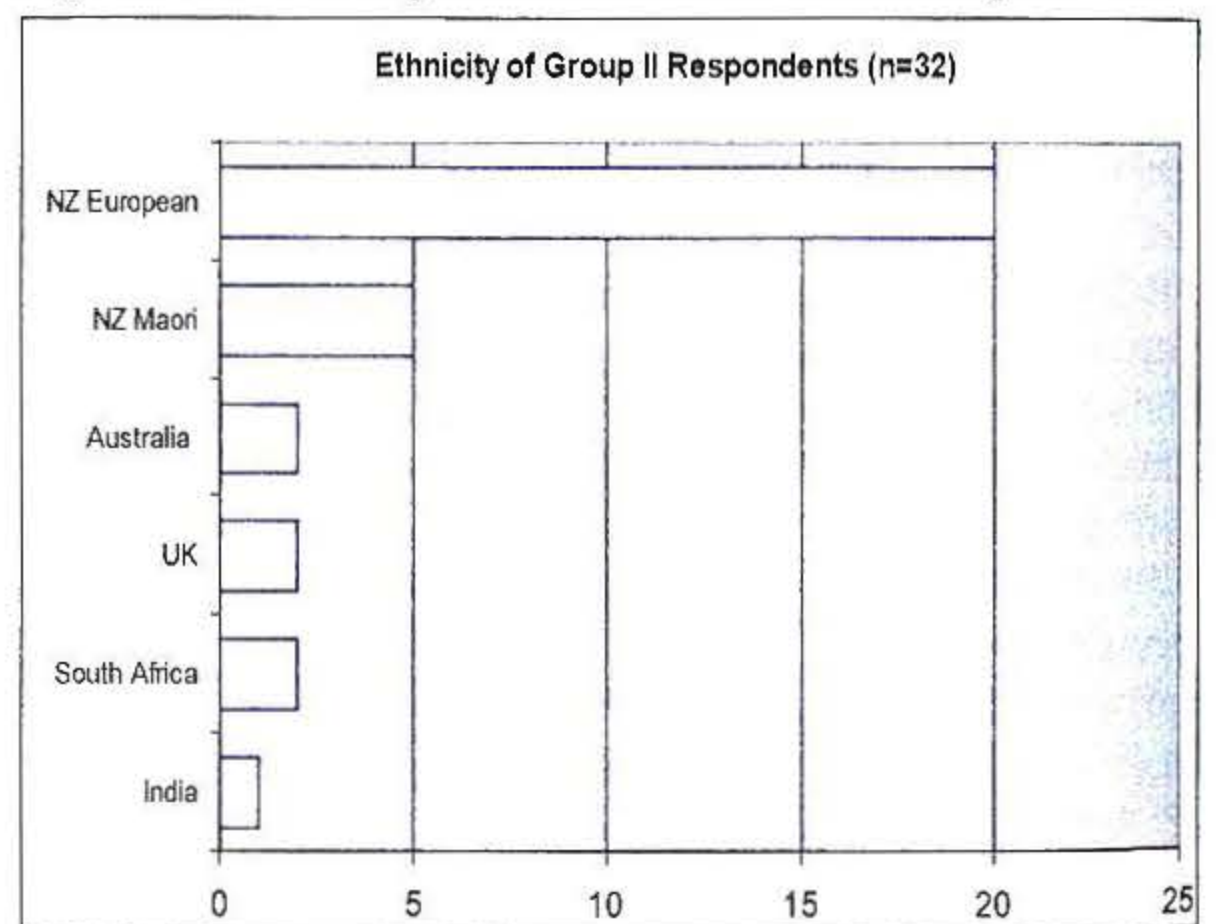


Figure 2: Country of Birth: Group III: CSRs (n=60)

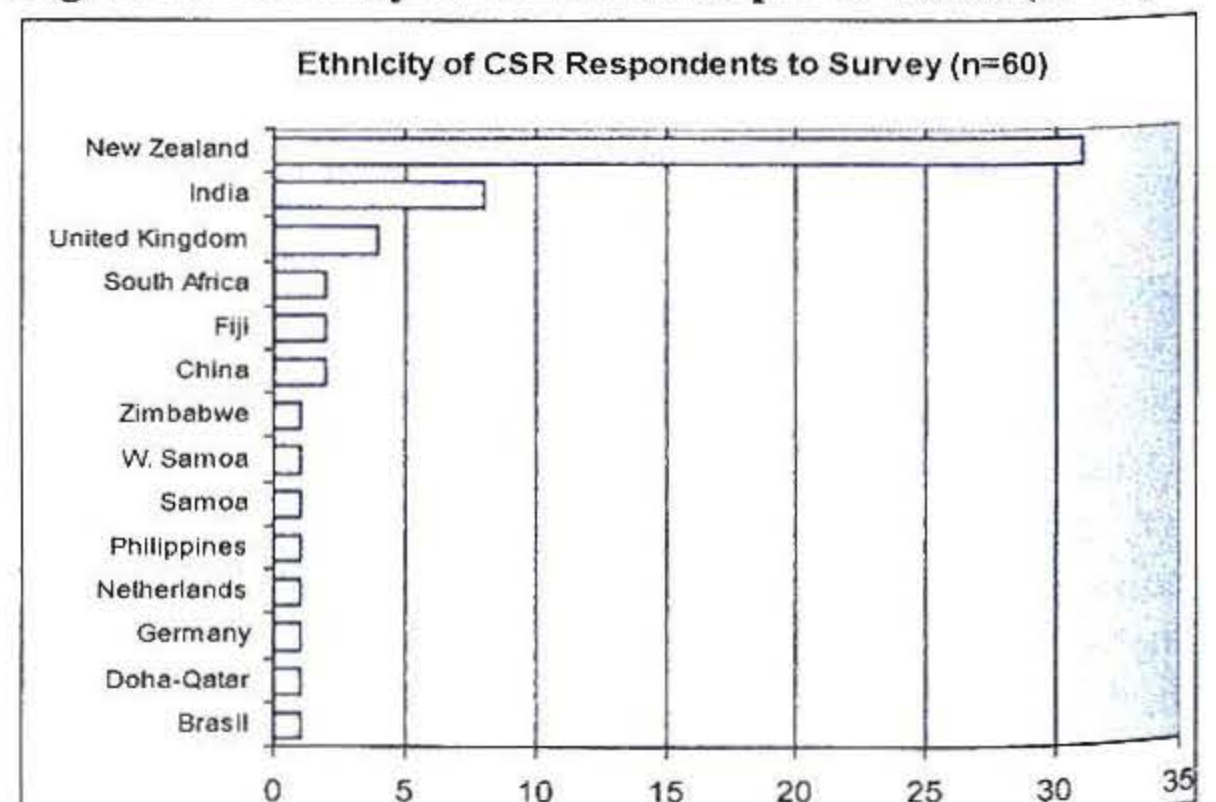


Table 2: The Case Study Workplaces

	OutsourcesCo	GovtOrg	FoodCo	MrkResearchCo	ExportCo	BankCo
No. of call centre sites	1	5	1	1	1	9
AveSeat Capacity	150	100	10	75	20	391
No. in-depth interviews	10	8	4	3	6	6
Entry level (surveys/focus gp)	10	22	6	25	6	22
Customer type	Multiples clients; utilities Consumer/businesses	Govt public Consumers	FMCG retail Business	Consumers Market research	Shareholders Financial quality	Consumers banking
Call Centre Service	Inbound/outbound	Inbound, advice	Inbound/outbound	Outbound	Inbound/outbound	Inbound/outbound
Workforce profile	Unskilled, Little training 70% female	Skilled, knowledge Intensive 6 wks training at start 75% female, full-time	Low level, semi Skilled workers product/co training 95% female	Immigrants Tert qualified students 70% female	Skilled, expert Knowledge intensive 60% female	Semiskilled Profession regular training 70% female
Employment	Flexible labour No union	Most full-time, full and part-time PSA	Full/part-time, some part-time Food Dist Union	Casual, all part-time No Union	Most full time Org Union	Full/part-time Finsec Union

Figure 3: Case studies

- *OutSourceCo* is a NZ privately owned outsourcer located in Auckland with 150 call centre seats. It was established in 1995 by an innovative manager and has a reputation as a quality call centre outsourcer, providing inbound and outbound calling services for a range of not-for-profit clients, utilities and retail operations.
- *GovtOrg* is a large Government public service organisation of 5000 staff, with 5 call centres operating 500 seats in total, across Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Palmerston North. The call centre operation of the large Government body was established in 1997 following a reorganisation to provide centralised customer service. The call centre operates Monday to Saturday mainly providing an inbound service for a range of private and business clients.
- *FoodCo* is a large Auckland based, food manufacturer that is part of a multinational enterprise with headquarters in Singapore. It is a leading supplier of branded food goods to retailers and foodservice operators. It first established a small in-house call centre operation (10 seats) in 1997 to realise a more customer oriented strategy and achieve higher sales volumes through their foodservice operators. The call centre provides inbound and outbound services for business customers directly to the foodservice sector and back to the account managers who deal with the supermarket clients.
- *MarketResearchCo* is a market research company based in Auckland. It is part of a London based multinational enterprise. Its call centre operation with 75 seat capacity, was set up in 1992 as the market research industry moved from face to face field research to CATI operated methods of collecting data. The call centre operates 5-11 each night, Saturday and Sunday all day. It employs mainly part time workers: students, new immigrants and workers supplementing their incomes.
- *ExportCo* is a 20 seat in-house call centre operation, part of a very large company involved in the export of primary produce. The call centre operation modelled on a bank call centre operation was first established in 1997 to provide expert inbound service. The information provided to callers to this company is complex and requires extensive training of call centre operators who need to take part in 6 weeks training to develop competencies before they can work the phones.
- *BankCo* is an Australian owned bank operating 5 call centres employing 39 call centre staff in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington. The call centre model was first adopted by this bank in 1997 when there was a wholesale move from face to face tellers to banking service via the telephone. BankCo has a multicultural workforce and their key focus is customer service.

Key Findings

At each of the six case studies, women had experienced career path progress, and, in some cases, had gained senior level positions in charge of the call centre

operations. In all cases, the women had gained their positions from their call centre work experience and they each spoke very positively about their career paths. Some of the patterns and key themes common to the case studies and the women interviewed follow.

All of the women enjoyed the call centre environment, many of them citing the 'energy' and the 'passion' they had developed for call centre work. In the analysis of 19 interview transcripts, there were 81 mentions of 'passion' (see figure 4 below).

When we first launched the call centre...I just decided I wanted to be part of setting it up ...I guess that's where my passion first started and it hasn't ever ever waned (Polly, Call Centre Manager, GovtOrg, 2004).

*I like motivating, people, I am **passionate**, uh, um...I don't consider myself a passionate person but I know have very strong feelings about things, certain things but I am not, you know about to jump about tell everybody about it...(Nora, Food Co, June 2005).*

When I came on board, one of the first things Polly said to me was "I'm nuts about call centres" and that's something that has stuck in my mind, that call centres engender a strong passion (HRM Manager, Grace GovtOrg, joint interview).

Career Progress Possibilities

Most of the women respondents reported that they had not initially planned to work in the call centre for a long period often, it was the discovery that they enjoyed call centre work, which had led to an increased commitment and concurrent career path.

It gave me a really good understanding of the industry so I got the bug for the call centre industry, it's really huge, and I thought I could really make a career out of it. I started networking with others in the industry (Polly, CC Manager, GovtOrg, 2004).

It's so rewarding to know that you have kick started their career; She is still a mentor and she has been hugely influential on my career path encouraging me to stay and work my way up (Juliana, CC Manager, FoodCo 2005)

I had to step away into my own career development ... I need to step into inbound environment or to an in-house environment like one into one of the bigger call centres like Telecom or Vodafone but more inbound focussed for my next career step (Rose, Team Leader, OutsourceCo, 2004).

Competence, connectedness and confidence: enabling women's careers

According to Deak (2002), who conducted extensive research in the United States on the development of girls, confidence, competence and connectedness play a very important part in the development of positive self-esteem. Each needs to develop in sync to ensure girls become capable, confident young women with positive self-images (Deak, 2002). During the interpretation of findings, it became obvious that confidence, competence and connectedness were all relevant in analysing women's career paths. Especially when considering that interrupted patterns of work, which are part of many

women work histories, could alter their self-confidence and acquisition of employment skills. The following will illustrate how the three constructs are central to the interpretation of findings.

Connectedness

Teamwork, meeting people and connecting or interacting with people in a positive environment were regularly mentioned in interviews. The responses from CSRs also showed that the majority had sought work in the call centre because a friend recommended it to them. Nvivo discourse analysis (Figure 4) shows that the words 'team' and 'teamwork' feature often in the interviews.

Forty nine per cent of the CSR respondents ranked 'Recommendation from a Friend' as most important when they sought work in the call centre. Of the 24 respondents who rank this as important, 18 (71%) are female. This is indicative that relationships with peers and colleagues were important to the women respondents. Other research in Australia call centres has shown the importance of social networks among women when they choose work (Rainnie & Drummond, 2006).

Alongside this aspect of connectedness, a surprising finding in the research was the practice of inclusiveness and diversity management that was evident at the call centres. While the diversity literature was not a part of the research, it became evident when speaking with managers and call centre workers at every level that being inclusive of a range of ethnic groups was central to many of the call centres. Some examples follow:

The management team, myself, the team leaders, workforce administrator and PA did a team building day. The purpose of the team building was to come back with a visual and written vision statement for the call centre that linked to the call centre strategywe came up with "nurturing our diversity to celebrate our strengths" (Sandra, Govt Org, 2004).

When asked to name the key benefits of the call centre work the following represents a sample of the 50 responses received from CSRs:

Meeting and talking to various people

Good atmosphere, meet new people

Pay, having money in my pocket, meeting new people

Broadens your outlook on life to talk to different people with various opinions

Meeting people from different ethnic backgrounds, ages and occupations

Meeting interesting people working here

Communication skills improved, got to know a lot of people, made some useful contacts

Besides the evidence presented in Figure 4, the interviewed women often spoke about the importance of

teamwork and connection in the call centre environment and the importance of having systems in place which can help workers dealing with enquiries professionally as they process orders or provide information. Non-participant observation at three of the case studies saw evidence of the team effort as operators focussed on dealing with a central entity 'the caller'. This had the effect of uniting call centre staff who would compare stories and call experiences with their colleagues during their breaks.

Figure 4: NVivo Analysis of Discourse

Word Query Search	References	Transcripts Analysed
Query i: Passion <i>Search on fun, love and passion</i>	81	17
Query ii: Coach <i>Search on coach, mentoring and training</i>	48	14
Query iii: Team <i>Search on team, teamwork</i>	82	19
Query iv: Flexibility <i>Search on Flexible and Flexibility</i>	24	11

Competence

Many of the workers interviewed acknowledged that call centre work can be very stressful at times, but respondents also frequently talked about the call centre workplace being a stimulating and exciting environment. This is partly because they often have to draw on all their skills and experience, especially when managing difficult callers. The adoption of standard operating systems and protocols help them deal positively with a range of call types. This, together with the training, can mitigate the stress of dealing in 'real time' with caller demands. With sufficient coaching and feed-back practices in place, employees with very few qualifications can soon learn to efficiently manage the caller/customer interaction. The women, who had earned promotion, had 'learned' on the job and they often made rapid career progress.

I came back and started managing my own team and I have been was promoted into the client services side, working closely with our Marketing Manager, doing purely account servicing (Rose, OutsourceCo, Team Leader, 2003).

Some of the call centre workers spoke with pride about the skills they had learned to enable them to remain professional, competent and in control of the customer service interaction. They used their learned competencies to step up to the challenge of managing a new project.

For the majority of women interviewed, their career paths had been self-directed. Some started as return-to-work mothers and had domestic responsibilities and felt it was important to balance their career needs with family and life responsibilities. Having some flexibility to work the

hours that fit in with school and holiday patterns is one of the attractions mentioned (especially by entry-level workers). In most cases, the women had been able to leave the call centre for temporary periods to give birth; or they worked different hours following their return to work. At entry level, the CSR participants reported that the work experience in the call centre had provided them with invaluable work experience and new skills. Table 3 lists some of the CSR responses to the survey question about the skills they had developed in the call centre.

Table 3: Responses to Q9 "New Skills Learned"

<i>Communicating clearly and better</i>
<i>Sales skills, communication skills, good judgement skills, people skills</i>
<i>Training skills, talking to people from different ethnic groups</i>
<i>Call centre experience, how to deal with people on the phone</i>
<i>Basically handling computer system (as in any new job), more confidence on telephone</i>
<i>Leadership skills/communication, handling difficult people on the phone, being patient with people on the phone, teamwork</i>
<i>I have learnt how to work within a large group of people and I have learned a lot about financial information</i>

Confidence

The woman respondents who had experienced career development talked about the personal growth and confidence they had gained working in the call centre. Positive aspects included opportunities to learn technology, databases and learning to manage customers in "real time". These seemed to have contributed to high levels of confidence.

...when Bill the MD first sat me down, he asked me: 'Rose, where do you see yourself in 5 years'? I said, behind your desk Bill. He was a bit shocked! I am bound to be successful it is inevitable (laugh). Sorry, it sounds a bit facetious (Rose Team Leader, 2003).

If you feel confident about your environment and that you will be heard - you can meet each challenge - my manager trusts me to get on with the job. One thing that I would emphasize is that all the people who have been successful here is because they are conscientious, self-driven and self-assured (Renee, Marketing Manager, OutsourceCo, 2004).

One of the survey questions asked CSRs to rank how important it was to gain experience in a New Zealand organisation by taking a job in the call centre. This was included in the questionnaire when it was observed early in the research that around half of the entry-level staff were new immigrants (see Figure 2). Gaining experience of New Zealand organisations seemed more important to the female operators with fifty-three per cent of the

female CSR workers ranking this as most important, compared with 30% of the male CSRs. Many of the entry-level workers used their call centre training to develop confidence, communication skills and first-hand experience of working in a New Zealand workplace. Despite being much more educated than many of their teamleaders, the new immigrant CSRs reported that the call centre environment had helped develop their skills, confidence and career prospects.

Discussion

This research is drawn from respondents in six case studies of call centres operating in six very different sectors. The current low levels of unemployment, a social partnership approach to employment and smaller call centre operations seem to have influenced the findings (Hunt & Rasmussen, 2007). Undoubtedly, the work experience of the women has been influenced by the macro environment and socio cultural norms leading to some new employment practices. In some call centres, managers have worked with the women to help them develop career paths that take them to the top of the call centres. In other call centres, the women have negotiated flexible work regimes and careers to fit in and around their life transitions. Many call centre workers have used their call centre work experience to 'jump start' their careers. At none of the case studies was there evidence of worker resistance to call centre technology or the control practices that are widely used and criticized in much of the call centre research (see below).

While recognising that the controls, monitoring and surveillance assisted by the technology can 'Taylorise' the work in a call centre, the negative experience reported in much of the international research is not reflected in this New Zealand call centre research.

The integrated communication technology used in the call centre may reduce the job to a basic level with scripts and systems guiding operators. In some situations, this can lead to deskilling but, as demonstrated in this research, call centre systems can help workers to develop new core competencies. Many respondents reported that the technology had enabled them to do their job. The technology was seen as one of the tools for the job. Respondents enjoyed using the databases and some had developed a particular expertise with their ability to search and run reports. This was more evident in those call centres where training for service delivery was more intensive, or where the nature of the work was more complex. The use of expert systems where extensive product or company knowledge is required even at entry level may have contributed to better outcomes in terms of job satisfaction and skills development. As women with relatively few qualifications have learned new skills, been promoted and received management and leadership training, this paper suggests that the call centre labour process has empowered staff rather than controlled and constrained them.

The importance of context

Context and subjectivity are key to understanding this range of different experiences and outcomes and this has been underplayed in the academic debate on call centre work. The women who feature in this research demonstrate that they are 'agents' or social actors who are free to 'sell their labour' by working in call centres. They accept the systems imposed by the call centre environment in return for the opportunity to connect in a social organisation and develop new skills. In the tight New Zealand labour market context, some of these women seemed to have developed strong negotiating power. Their labour has been sought after. As 'agents' in control of their own destinies they have chosen to stay and work in the call centres. This may change in the coming years as unemployment levels rise again (which would be an indication of the importance of context).

The managerial prerogative suggests that the power rests with the employer or the person who represents the shareholder as in an employment relationship. However, the relationship between management and these women seems to be inter-dependent. They both have power. The employer is dependent on some of the women to manage or lead their call centre teams and ensure the call centre functions effectively. This includes motivating staff to answer calls in the right manner and act as the 'face-less' voice of the company. The women depend on the employer to provide work that accommodates their individual and personal non-work needs. Such needs may include: work flexibility; social capital development; training for new skills and competencies leading to career prospects or progress within the organisation. The psychological contract that develops between the employer and employee can be a mutually motivating force for both parties to the employment relationship.

Conclusion

The women interviewed for this research seemed to have become more confident and competent through the process of doing their work i.e. dealing with a range of customer types, meeting multiple demands, managing interactive databases and teams. It appeared that they applied their learned skills of managing callers to manage their employer, though the actual extent of this is unclear.

Further quantitative research is needed to demonstrate whether female call centre workers are achieving equity *across* call centres. In the call centres examined, this paper suggests that the women in the call centres examined are developing competence, connection and confidence, each of which contributes to their career path development.

Note

1. Contributing editor.

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